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AUTHOR	Glassner, Benjamin
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ABSTRACT

Good writing involves a series of mental processes which go far beyond what is included in traditional writing instruction. Students are often evaluated on single writing samples written in short periods of time whereas good writing involves many revisions and much more time. Traditional instruction has emphasized the analytic processes of the left hemisphere of the brain. Recent research suggests that there is an interplay between the holistic right hemisphere and the analytic left hemisphere in the composing process. "Extensive composing," the reporting of what is already formulated, is chiefly a left hemisphere activity. "Reflexive composing," the construction of meaning from feeling, is a right hemisphere activity. If students are to use language as a tool for discovery and learning, they must be given the time and opportunity to experience that the search for something to say is as critical as the ability to say it. (DC)

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HEMISPHERIC INTEGRATION IN WRITING PROCESSES

by Benjamin Glassner

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HEMISPHERIC INTEGRATION IN WRITING PROCESSES

Few who have really engaged in the often exasperating struggle to construct meaning through language would deny that good writing takes time, that the process often involves a series of approximations, rarely successful at first, a series through which the writer experiments, tests, evaluates and re-evaluates, and qualifies her way first towards the clarification of her own ideas and experiences and ultimately to their communication. Pulitzer Prize winning author and master teacher Donald Murray has put it quite simply. "Writing," he says, "is thinking!"

But the messages students receive are often quite different. Often their very futures are determined by assessments of their performances on single samples written in quite short periods of time. Upon such assessments rest decisions of admission, placement, success or failure, graduation and career.

If we are to accept Murray's definition of writing as thinking, then clearly, whatever our students are doing, it is not writing! They have learned that what is called writing by their teachers is a rather neat, orderly, and straightforward series of acts, something that can be accomplished in relatively short periods of time. Their overwhelming concern is with the surface features of their texts, with questions of usage and style. Their attention is directed not to ideas but rather to the application of prescribed formulas.

Modern discourse theory asserts that purpose is most fundamental to writing. "The aim of the discourse," according to James Kinneavy, "determines everything else in the process (including) 'what' is talked about, the oral or written medium chosen, the words and grammatical patterns used . . . ." Yet genuine purpose is what students' writing most often lacks and is that to which traditional instruction most often has failed to attend. Ours is a culture which values objectivism; we dismiss what is not verifiable. Our educational system rewards only right answers. As Janice Lauer has described them, typical writing assignments "(trap) students in contexts so narrow or artificial that they preclude genuine puzzlement or curiosity." The results are the tortured essays which, as Janet Emig has observed, "seem to be written from one layer of the self--the ectoderm only." Given recent findings in the neurosciences, we might rather say that such performances are "half-brained."

The failure to represent writing to students as a powerful instrument of thought and learning has sources well beyond the disciplines of English; it can be seen throughout the curricula. Here we need to look to the traditions of positivist science which through its step-child, behaviorism, has exercised perhaps the greatest impact on educational policy in America. This is a tradition which denies any explanatory role to the phenomena of subjective experience.

What has caught the attention of composition theorists are the recent findings in the neurosciences which suggest that ours is a two-brain system.

Until fairly recently, investigators have paid attention chiefly to the structures of the left, so-called "dominant" hemisphere. However, in the past thirty years, reports

Program in Community College Education, The University of Texas at Austin, EDB 348, Austin, Texas 78712

of specific cognitive deficits resulting from right cerebral injuries have accumulated, and the right hemisphere is increasingly recognized as playing important roles in human thought. As a result, the original concept of hemispheric dominance is giving way to one of hemispheric specialization. Studies of brain-injured and neurosurgical patients have shown that each hemisphere is able to learn, remember and perceive. And most important to our concerns here, higher psychological functions appear to result from a continuous interaction between the two. While participating jointly, each is specialized and analyzes separately the information it receives.

While left hemisphere processes are crucial to articulation, denotation and the conscious rule-governed functions, right hemisphere processes play important roles in affective functions including imagery, connotation and our sense of emotional appropriateness in discourse. Our recent research in composing suggests an interplay of the holistic right hemisphere with the analytic left hemisphere in the processes of composing.

By adapting a methodology developed by Leonide Goldstein of the Rutgers Medical School, one based on the electrocortical measures of EEG, I was able to examine the relative activation of the left and right hemispheres which accompanied two brief episodes of composing by twenty-four college students. Episode one asked students to describe a process, how something is done or made, while episode two asked them to recall a profoundly moving personal experience.

We found that *extensive composing*, composing aimed at reporting what is already formulated and available in memory, focused on communication and the surface features of texts, appears to be chiefly a left hemisphere activity. *Reflexive composing*, slower and more complex, its focus on discovering, on the active construction of meaning from feeling, appears to involve a proportionately higher degree of right-brained activity.

While the conclusions drawn from this study are tentative owing to the small sample and the limited composing time observed, they suggest that the types of composing processes and activities most emphasized and sponsored in school writing engage but one half of our students' brains. Traditional writing instruction and assignments that merely ask students to report information, to tap memory, address only the more conscious, left-brained activities of composing. If students are rather to use language as a tool for inquiry and learning, they must be given both the time and the opportunity, as James Moffett has put it, "to abstract from the ground up." They should, for example, choose their own topics. Any instruction which invites students to invent and to discover, to make corrections between the concepts they're learning in a given discipline and their own experiences, and to do it in their own language, fosters more integrated use of the hemispheres. *They must experience that the search for something to say is as critical as the ability to say it.* Their teachers must understand that one is not possible without the other.

Benjamin Glassner
Department of Humanities
Michigan Technological University
Houghton, Michigan 49931

Excerpted from a paper presented to the First Annual Intellectual Skills Conference, 1982. Contact the author for further information.

KAREN WATKINS, EDITOR
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